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MODERN BRITISH WATER-COLOUR DRAWINGS

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MODERN BRITISH WATER-COLOUR DRAWINGS.

RATHER more than a hundred and fifty years ago the foundation was laid of that great school of water-colour painting which plays a part of such importance in the history of British Art. Before 1750, it is true, there were in England many artists who used the water-colour medium with notable skill and complete discretion, but there was certainly no general movement in the interest of this branch of practice, and no sign that it was likely to become fashionable either with art workers or the public. About this date, however, several men of marked ability made a simultaneous discovery that they could with water colour obtain results of a most desirable type; and then and there they set to work to develop its possibilities, and to give it a standing among technical processes that it had never before occupied.

THE first and foremost of this group of artists was Paul Sandby, who has, with some justice, been called the Father of the British Water-Colour School. He and his brother Thomas were draughtsmen of high repute, teachers who had a very considerable influence upon art education in the eighteenth century, and executants whose knowledge and taste deserve even now to be acknowledged as surprisingly accurate and well-balanced. Thomas followed the profession of an architect, and was the first Professor of Architecture in the Royal Academy; but Paul distinguished himself as a painter of landscape, figures, and portraits, and held more than one important post as an art master. During his lifetime of eighty-four years, from 1725 to 1809, most of the men whose names are inseparably connected with the earlier progress of water-colour painting in this country were born or flourished. Many of them were his pupils, and of those who did not come so directly under his influence a great number undoubtedly owed something of their manner to the example set by him in his own practice. A list of his contemporaries includes J. R. Cozens, George Barret, Thomas Girtin, John Varley, and Gainsborough, as well as Turner, De Wint, David Cox, William Hunt, Samuel Prout, and Copley

Fielding, all of them famous water colourists, whose activity in this branch of production had permanent results of the highest value. These, however, were only the stars in a company that was notable both for the number of its members and for the variety of its accomplishments; the minor parts were played with excellent discretion, and everybody concerned helped loyally in the evolution of an influential and consistent school, with aims properly understood and methods duly regulated.

THE reason why Paul Sandby stood out conspicuously among so many men of memorable power is to be found in the spirit with which he applied himself to the assertion of ideas which had not before been allowed to influence the practice of water-colour painting. He was really the first to break away from the conventions by which the art had been previously restricted and to show himself to be independent of traditions that were by no means calculated to make for sound development. Naturally, he was in much of his work guided by the spirit of the moment; but in a large proportion of what he produced he was clearly inspired by a much more liberal conception of artistic obligations. He was a sincere student of nature, and responded readily to the suggestions that he derived from her at first hand. In fact, he had two sides—the one marked by all the classicism that was the fashion of a period over-ridden by the delusion of the "grand style," the other cleansed of mere mannerism and freshened by contact with the open air.

IT was this reminder of the worthiness of natural motives that he gave to the men about him, a suggestion, based upon his own honest beliefs, that was eagerly accepted by many artists who were capable of carrying further what he had begun and of establishing as an æsthetic principle what he advanced by way of conscious or unconscious protest against the customs of his time. His protest was the more readily endorsed because it was unexaggerated, a gentle hint of the necessity for change rather than a blatant attack upon everything that had hitherto been accepted as infallible. He showed a comparatively easy way out of a difficulty about which many men were becoming impatient, but he left to others the completion of a movement that was destined to change the whole course of British water-colour art.

THIS change was not merely in matters of theory and limited only to questions of subject selection; it was actually a reform in technical processes. Hitherto water-colour had been used as a simple accessory, as a device for giving an appearance of finish to black and white drawings. Its treatment was purely conventional

and referable only remotely to any observation of nature. The artists of the time made careful and elaborate designs, highly finished in pencil or crayon, and then tinted them lightly in accordance with certain set rules. Their method was much the same as is followed now by architectural draughtsmen : it was entirely without spontaneity, a self-conscious and formal trick of craftsmanship that made no demands either upon their powers of observation or upon their capacities for colour management, and depended for its success almost entirely upon a small faculty for decorative arrangement. The results arrived at in this way were, it is true, pleasing enough ; but the limitations of the method were so definite that it is easy to understand why few of the greater men were disposed to make water colour a vehicle for expressing their deeper ideas. It suited them well enough for trivialities, but it was, they thought, by no means adapted for serious work, or for pictorial production of an ambitious type.

PERHAPS this want of appreciation was to some extent due to the use that a certain section of art workers made of the medium. There was at the time a fashion for publishing engraved views of places noted for their picturesqueness or interest, and the drawings prepared to guide the engraver were, as a rule, executed in the customary combination of line and tint. The water-colour painter then held the same sort of position that the photographer does now ; he recorded facts for other people to use ; and his excursions into original effort were viewed as scarcely legitimate. If he wanted to rank as an artist he had to work in oils. So long as he confined himself to the slighter process it mattered little what he did ; his art was a subordinate one, and comparatively of no account, no matter what might be the skill with which he exercised it. People seemed to have forgotten that water colour was really the older form of practice, and that in the hands of the artists of the middle ages it had the highest possibilities ; they judged it only by what they saw at the moment when it had degenerated into a mere appendage to other technical devices.

BUT by the end of the eighteenth century this misconception was rapidly disappearing, thanks to the exertions of the many painters who perceived what was needed to put new life into the neglected and mishandled art ; a better judgment was beginning to prevail, and both the public and the artistic community were prepared to accept departures that a few years before would have seemed quite indefensible. From that time onwards there has been no pause in

the advance and expansion of water-colour painting. One by one the cramping conventions have vanished ; the narrow limitations of subject selection have given place to the widest freedom ; the restrictions of colour treatment have been abandoned in favour of the fullest harmonies and the most varied arrangements. Turner, De Wint, and David Cox, with many other splendid craftsmen, gave the most convincing demonstrations of the adaptability of the medium, and proved beyond dispute its value as a means of expression. They set an example that their successors have been glad enough to follow, and kindled an enthusiasm that has lasted to the present day. In their best things the protest that Paul Sandby was the first to voice received its most authoritative endorsement ; their manner of regarding and recording nature claimed a degree of attention that would never have been given to the limited observations of the earlier school ; and they prepared the ground for that wonderful growth of artistic enlightenment of which we are now enjoying the full fruition.

MODERN water colour owes, indeed, more than can be well explained to the initiative of the men who were at work a hundred years ago. From them it has derived its sincerity, its freedom from common-place mannerism, its variety of invention, and its ready responsiveness to wholesome suggestion. From them, too, come the particular tendencies which are so evident in the productions of living men. For instance, it is a matter of general knowledge that this branch of practice is much more in favour with landscape painters than with those who deal with the figure. This preference is doubtless due in some measure to the advantages which water colour, by its greater luminosity and delicacy, presents to the interpreters of atmosphere and aërial colour, but it is certainly to be ascribed also to the fact that the majority of the earlier workers concerned themselves with landscape motives. A few painted rustic subjects with figures, or compositions in which humanity played a part of some importance, but not many of these artists enjoyed anything like the professional success that was gained by the great array of students of nature among whom Turner was the dominating influence. All the development that has taken place in our school and has brought it to its present condition of solid prosperity, has not perceptibly affected the relation that one type of motive bears to the other. Figure painters we certainly have, whose work in water colour is sound enough ; we have, indeed, a quite appreciable proportion who touch the highest level of accomplishment ; but they are greatly outnumbered by the landscape men, and are, if

anything, relatively less numerous than they were when the traditions that are to-day held in respect were being brilliantly established.

IT follows, therefore, that in any record of contemporary water-colour work in this country the first consideration must be given to the landscapes. Their variety and their remarkable average of artistic quality prove indisputably that in the making of them no common convention is allowed to interfere with direct and spontaneous inspiration. Where they are referable to earlier authorities they show, at least, that they do not merely repeat, parrot-fashion, truths that were quite convincingly stated years before, and that they are honest attempts to bring up to date the spirit rather than the mannerism of another epoch. A touch of modern enlightenment, of present-day conviction, gives them independence and individuality. The influence of the past, with all its persuasive authority, does not fetter them so much that they cannot keep themselves in sympathy with the world about them, and be nothing better than anachronisms without vitality sufficient to justify their existence. They are records, rather, of the learning of the men who have studied closely the history of art, and know intimately the details of its progress, but yet have sufficient intelligence to realise that there is upon them an obligation to guard this progress from being checked or hampered.

BY way of example it is worth while to examine the landscapes of such painters as Mr. Wimperis, Mr. Thorne Waite, Mr. H. B. Brabazon, or Mr. A. W. Rich, for in them may be found reflections respectively of David Cox, De Wint, Turner, and such earlier masters as Varley and Girtin. In each case the source of inspiration is plainly perceptible, and the effect that the study of his great predecessors has had on the modern man is too evident to admit of dispute. Mr. F. G. Cotman, too, as might be expected from his ancestry, brings the traditions of the Norwich school to bear upon his effort ; and Mr. Bernard Evans allies himself obviously with the classicism of Barret, and J. R. Cozens. Yet there is not one of these artists that can be dismissed as a copyist or as a mere reproducer of ideas that he has conveyed from other people. Each has retained the characteristics and particular features of his æsthetic forefathers, but he has not on that account refused to adapt himself to conditions of professional practice that his ancestors knew nothing about. On the contrary, it is the combination of the dignity of other generations with the technical resource of our own times that makes the productions of these men, and of many others like them,

so instructive as object lessons in artistic evolution. It links together the various stages through which the art has passed, and points the direction in which coming changes must be looked for by everyone who is watching the course of events.

THERE is hardly less significance in the comparison that can be made between the early water-colourists and the painters who, without openly following them, are striving now to solve the same problems that these famous craftsmen were busy with a century ago. By this comparison the salient points of difference between the new and old forms of the same creed are sharply contrasted, but at the same time, whatever there may be of community of belief is brought into clear prominence. For instance, it is not difficult to recognise the old love of decorative elegance and studied arrangement under the apparently naturalistic manner of Mr. E. A. Waterlow, Mr. J. W. North, and Mr. Alfred East, or to trace the traditional atmosphere of romance in the compositions of Mr. Robert Little and Mr. Albert Goodwin. The veil of modern manner is, perhaps, slighter still in the works of Mr. Leslie Thomson, Mr. Aumonier, Mr. Frank Walton, Miss Clara Montalba, and Sir Francis Powell, who, with all their closeness of observation of open-air details, are designers to whom the exact spacing of the pictorial pattern is quite as important as the accurate rendering of relations of tone and subtleties of colour gradation. Even through the rugged realism of Mr. R. W. Allan, the illustrative correctness of Mr. G. C. Haite and Mr. C. J. Watson, the topographic minuteness of Mr. Fulleylove and Mr. Elgood, the familiar actuality of Mr. Herbert Marshall and Miss Rose Barton, and the disciplined carelessness of Mr. James Paterson, runs the same vein of decorative intention that connects all branches of the present-day practice with the school of a century-and-a-half ago.

IN those days, however, this decorative intention dominated and directed the art of even the most advanced men, and to it the strict realisation of nature was generally subordinated. Everything was designed with an eye to correctness of style, and if style and naturalism happened to clash it was almost always naturalism that suffered. But, as time has gone on, ways have been found to balance better the various elements of sound pictorial construction, and to combine with excellent taste many apparently incongruous qualities so as to produce a perfectly acceptable harmony. Certainly, in the realism of Mr. Wilfrid Ball, Mr. Eyre Walker, Mr. Lionel Smythe, Mr. Matthew Hale, Mr. Macbride, Mr. Moffat Lindner, and Mrs. Allingham, or in the frank directness of Mr. Claude Hayes

and Mr. Yeend King, to mention a few among the many painters of every-day motives, there is, at first sight, little to recall the fantastic vision of Turner or the strict formality of the Sandbys and their contemporaries ; yet even in such definite expressions of the modern idea the spirit by which British water-colourists have been inspired from the first makes its influence felt plainly enough. It has only changed its form, and has lost none of its strength by lapse of years.

BUT it is by no means as easy to connect the figure painters who are now in evidence with their few eighteenth-century predecessors. From the elegant rustics of Wheatley or the pretty artificialities of Cipriani, to the elaborate and learned compositions of Sir J. D. Linton, or the strongly realised studies by Mr. Clausen, is, indeed, a far cry ; and to compare the genre of Thomas Heaphy, or Joshua Cristall, with that of Mr. Walter Langley, or Mr. Austen Brown, is to mark a development that is quite surprising in its suddenness. There is, perhaps, something of Stothard's intention in Miss Kate Greenaway, or Mr. George Wetherbee, a little, possibly, even in Mr. Robert Fowler, and the sequence of ideas from Bonington and Cattermole, through Sir John Gilbert, to Mr. Byam Shaw, is certainly traceable, but to find the prototypes of Mr. H. S. Tuke, Mr. Edgar Bundy, Mr. Weguelin, or Mrs. Stanhope Forbes, would be a matter of considerable difficulty. Really, the modern figure work in water colour must be regarded as more or less an independent creation, and as being inspired hardly at all by any earlier practice. In the hands of men like Sir J. D. Linton, or Professor Herkomer, it approximates to oil painting in its strength and variety ; and treated as it was by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and is by Mr. Napier Hemy, it loses its distinctive character and becomes almost indistinguishable from the rival medium. Of the artists who use it in this way a fairly long list could be made, a list that would include Mr. E. J. Gregory, Mr. Abbey, Mr. Wainwright, Mr. Hugh Carter, Mr. J. R. Reid, and other men whose drawings rank high in contemporary exhibitions. Still, in such productions is illustrated not the later stages of such an evolution as appears in the landscape work, but rather the beginnings of a new phase of art effort that will in time change the aspect of the whole of our water-colour school.

A. L. Baldry.

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FROM A WATER-COLOUR DRAWING BY

J. AUMONIER, R.I.

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"A VILLAGE STREET, KENT".

FROM A WATER-COLOUR DRAWING BY

MRS. HELEN ALLINGHAM, R.W.S.

Mrs. Helen Allingham, R.W.S.—"*At Burton, near Brisport, Dorset.*"

WILFRID BALL, R.E.—"*Durham.*"

"SENNEN COVE, CORNWALL"

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Wilfrid Hyde '95

H. B. Brabazon—"*The Cemetery, Cairo.*"

T. Austen Brown, A.R.S.A.—"*The Crofter's Byre.*"

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"MEN THRESHING BEANS"

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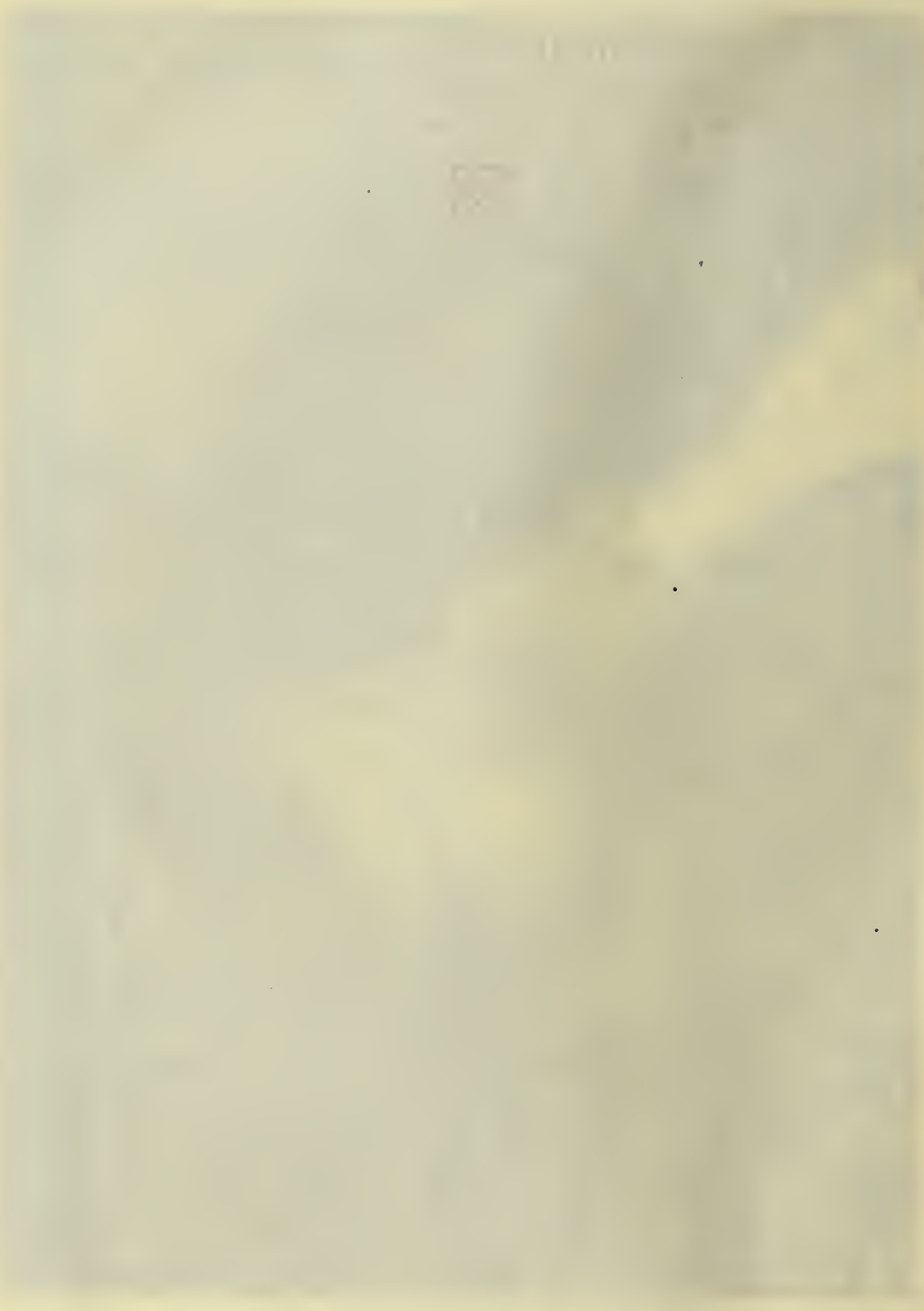
GEORGE CLAUSEN, A.R.A., R.W.S.



G. Clausen. 1888

F. G. Cotman, R.I.—"*New Elvet Bridge, Durham.*"

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ALFRED EAST, A.R.A.—"*Landscape.*"

GEORGE S. ELGOOD, R.I.—"*Medici Gardens, Rome.*"

GEORGE S. ELGOOD, R.I.—"*Villa Lante.*"

BERNARD EVANS, R.I.—"*Leafy June, Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire.*"

"THE CATHEDRAL AND NEW ELVET BRIDGE, DURHAM"

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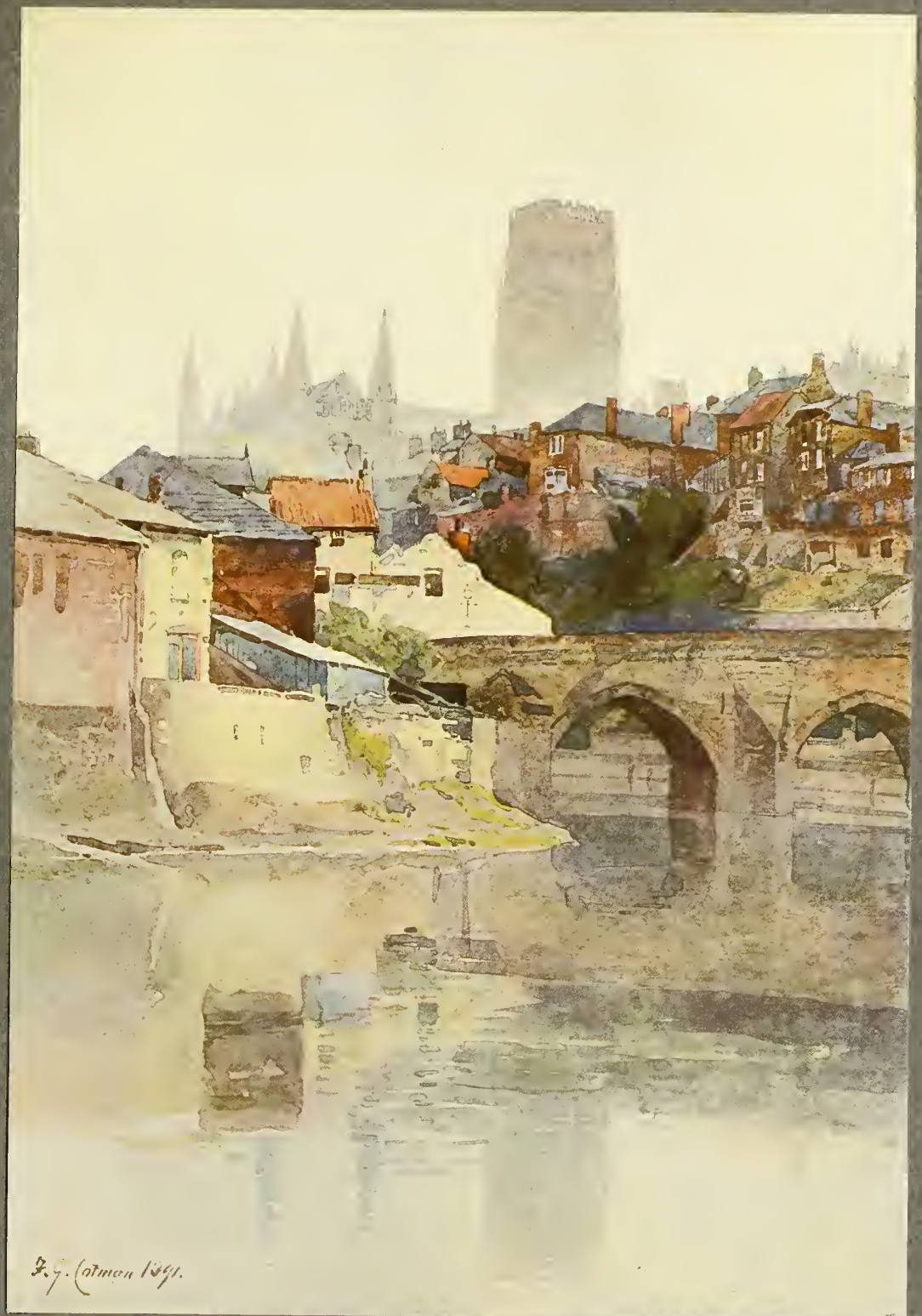
F. J. Cotman 1811.

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JOHN FULLEYLOVE, R.I.—"*Roman Bath, Nimes.*"

"THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE ERECHTHEUM WITH THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARLIER TEMPLE OF ATHENA POLIAS"

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"AT LAMINGTON, ON THE CLYDE"

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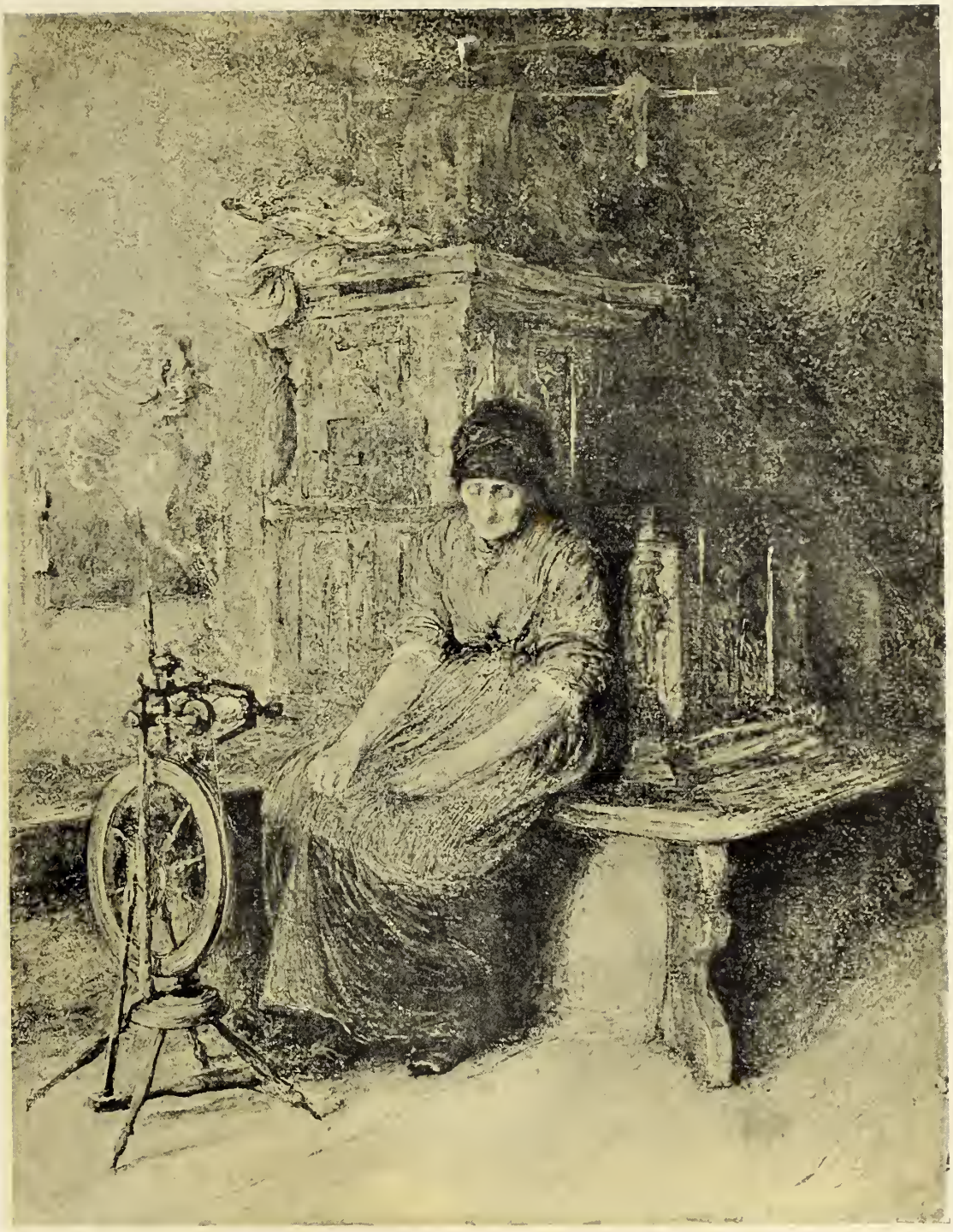

PROFESSOR H. VON HERKOMER, R.A.—"*Weary!*"

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WALTER LANGLEY, R.I.—"*After the Storm.*"

WALTER LANGLEY, R.I.—"*Waiting for the Boats.*"

MOFFAT LINDNER—"*On a Dutch River.*"

"HARROWING"

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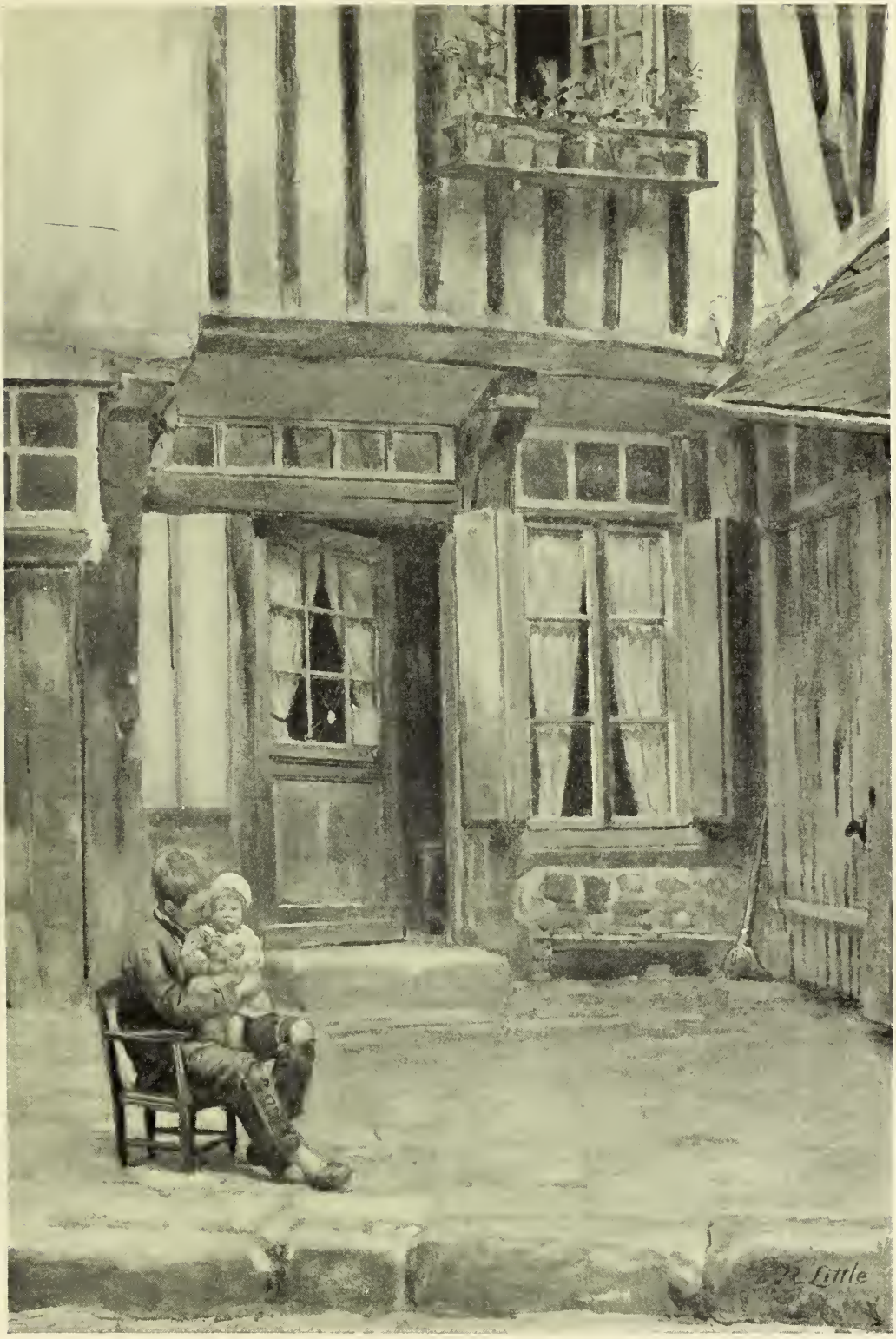

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"NEAR PULBOROUGH, SUSSEX"

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W.P

ALEX. MACBRIDE, R.I., R.S.W.

"Puerta de Sevilla, Cremona."

"Early Spring."

HERBERT MARSHALL, R.W.S.—"*Piccadilly.*"

"Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me."

Robert Browning.

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HERBERT MARSHALL, R.W.S.—"*A Frozen Highway.*"

CLARA MONTALBA, R.W.S.—"*A Winter Day, Venice.*"

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"MONDE COMME LES ELFES"

DE CHARLES DE COSTER A WALTER SCOTT

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JAMES PATERSON, A.R.W.S., A.R.S.A.—"*Hastings Mill.*"

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"BRINGING HOME THE FLOCK"

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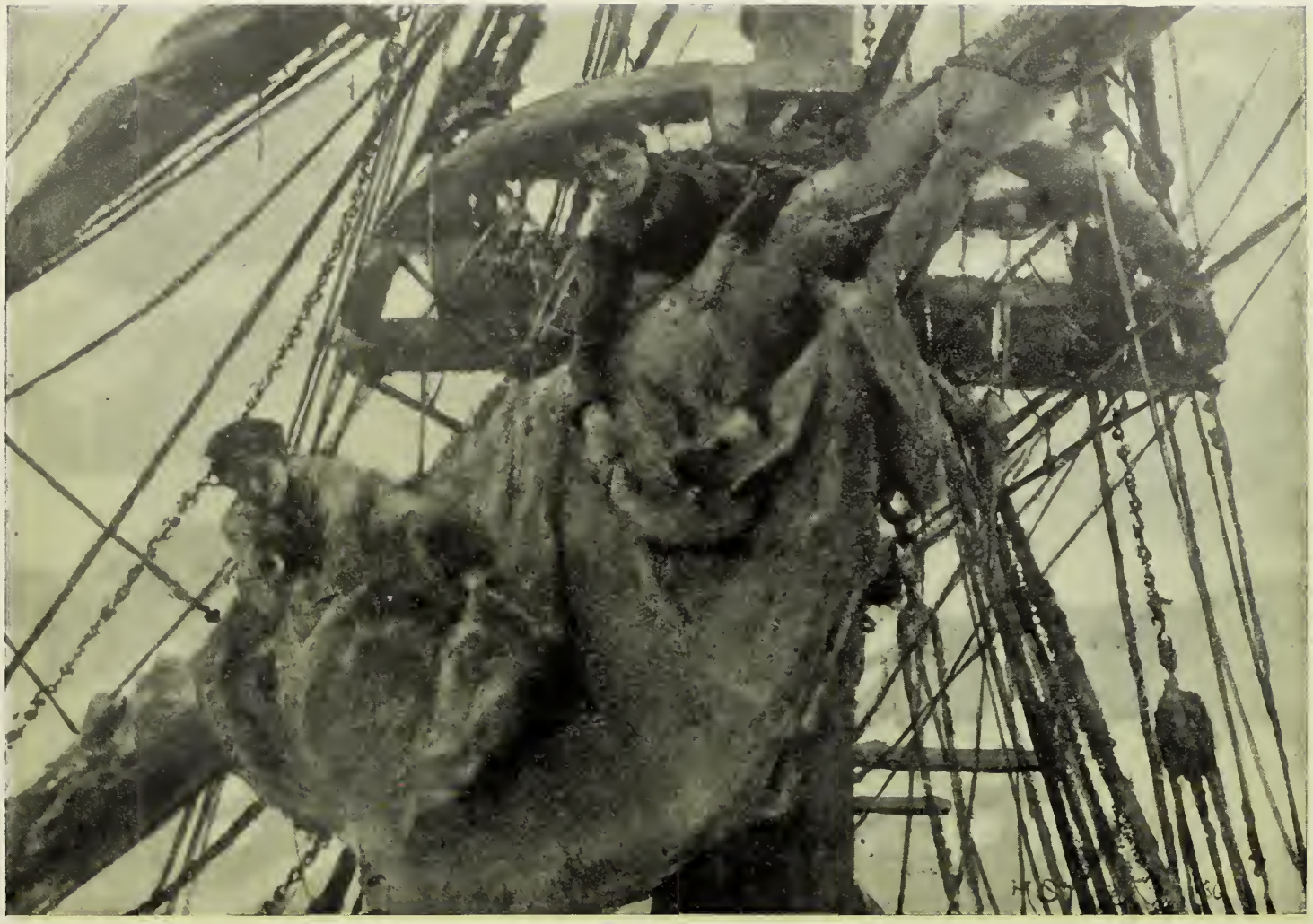

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THORNE WAITE, R.W.S.—"*The Downs above Worthing.*"

THORNE WAITE, R.W.S.—"*Cornfield at Aldborough.*"

"IN THE MIDST OF LIFE . . ."

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"THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER"

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Frank Walton, R.I.—"*After Tempest.*"

C. J. Watson, R.E. —"*Market Day, Richmond, Yorks.*"

"THE MARKET CART"

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GEORGE WETHERBEE, R.I.—"*A Harvest Home.*"

E. M. Wimperis, V.P.R.I.—"*A Sussex Lane.*"

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